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SIDNEY LANIER'S LECTURES.¹

ALTHOUGH Sidney Lanier has been almost twenty-two years in his grave, he is really just now beginning to live and to find his place among the immortal makers of literature. On examining the histories of American literature that have been put forth within the last quarter of a century, one notes with pleasure the growing appreciation of the writers of these for the qualities of Lanier's poetry and for his literary insight and keenness of criticism, and for that most beautiful of all his poems—the poet's own life. In the earlier of these works there is barely a mention of Lanier's name; but the later critics have given more and more attention and space to him of whom Mr. William Hayes Ward long ago said, "He will, I think, take his final rank with the first princes of American song." It is not, however, as a poet that we wish to consider Lanier at this time, but rather as a lecturer and critical scholar and as the author of an important work recently issued in two volumes by Messrs. Doubleday, Page & Company under the title of "Shakspeare and his forerunners."

With the inadequate training of his youth, with the interruption of his literary studies and development by the war, and with the struggle with disease and poverty after the war, it is not to be expected that Lanier should have won for himself a position of authority or even eminent respect among scholars of broader and uninterrupted training. It seems almost marvelous that a raw Southern boy, with what he himself called a farcical college training, should have fought his way up against all adverse circumstances to a recognized place not only among American poets but among critical thinkers and men of letters. He came to a knowledge of the beginnings of English literature only at ma-

¹"Shakspeare and His Forerunners: Studies in Elizabethan Poetry and Its Development from Early English." By Sidney Lanier. Two volumes. Doubleday, Page & Co. 1902.

turity; but he prosecuted his studies with a zeal born of passion, and came to have a thoroughly appreciative if not a scholarly knowledge of the whole of our early literature. Yet with all his intense application and wide reading after he came to Baltimore, one must see that it is not as a technical scholar that Lanier is to find his place among American critics, but rather as an inspiring writer and lecturer on poetry. As a judge of what is best in literature and as a natural appreciative critic on poetry and life, he yields to none who has written on this side of the water. His appreciation and criticism were not second-hand nor in any sense servile. He went back to the original sources and read the poets, not about them, and his utterances were the natural and spontaneous expression of his own emotions and judgments. He was a discoverer and revealer of the beauties of poetry yet unappreciated and of poets who had long lain neglected, and his discoveries will to a great degree stand the accumulated judgment of time.

It is true that Lanier, with his Southern temperament, was an enthusiast; but his taste was so pure and his judgment so sure that he rarely allowed himself to be betrayed by the ruling passions of his life into statements too excessive and dogmatic. This intense enthusiasm is one of the characteristics that make his lectures so entertaining and inspiring. In the lectures under consideration he naturally excluded all the dry-as-dust criticism characteristic of the German school; and yet he did not despise the results to be obtained from the patient examination and collection of facts, especially when they are applicable to the deeper significance of the personality and growth of art and character in any given author.

The two courses of lectures contained in the volumes under consideration were delivered in Baltimore during the winter of 1879 and 1880, one to a class of young ladies at the Peabody Institute, the other to students of the Johns Hopkins University. Mr. Henry Wysham Lanier has edited the manuscripts left by his father, and has prepared a becomingly modest preface, in which he adequately sums up the author's

object in these words: "What he set himself to accomplish, then, was to picture the Master Poet as the culmination of that marvellous Elizabethan Age which came flaming upon a world just beginning to guess at its own true self. In order to show the situation adequately, he selected certain beacon lights far back—'Beowulf,' 'St. Juliana,' 'The Address of the Soul to the Body,' and so on—which seemed to reveal to the mind of Englishmen and their poets during that semisavage period which is roughly terminated with the Norman Conquest. With his usual faculty for bringing together illuminating facts apparently diverse, he traced the development in man's attitude toward God, toward Nature, and toward his fellow-man in these Early English writings, in the neglected Scotch poets of the fourteenth century, in Chaucer, in Shakespeare, and in modern literature. Then, after a survey of the sonnet writers from Surrey to Shakespeare (half forgotten now, only because they were presently obscured by the greatest light of English poetry), he came to an intimate study of William Shakespeare, the man, and his art."

The opening lectures were devoted to a scientific investigation of the relations of poetry to sound—the rhythms, the tunes, and the tone colors of verse; but as the author had treated this subject more fully in his "Science of English Verse," published in his own lifetime, all but the barest outline of his theory is omitted from these volumes. The importance of a careful study of the minor poets of the Elizabethan Age and a survey of the beginnings of our literature is emphasized because of the historical setting and perspective in which by this means we can view the supreme excellence of Shakespeare.

The supernatural in early English and in Shakespeare is shown by a comparison of an "Address of the Soul to the Body" of about the tenth century with the ghostly apparitions in "Hamlet." Nature in early English and in Shakespeare is developed by a comparison of the nature utterances and background in "Beowulf" with those in "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Chapters following this are "Some Birds of English Poetry," including the "Phoenix" of Cynewulf, the "Twa Daws" of William Dunbar, and "The Phoenix and the Turtle" of Shakespeare, "Women of English Poetry," "The Wife in Middle English Poetry," and several chapters devoted to the "Sonnet Makers from Surrey to Shakespeare." Under the last caption we have a discussion of the place of the sonnet in poetry, a résumé of the writers of the sonnet outburst during the last decades of the sixteenth century, with a special discussion of the sonnet sequences of William Drummond of Hawthornden, Samuel Daniel, Henry Constable, Michael Drayton, Sir Philip Sidney, William Habington, Bartholomew Griffin, and Shakespeare. These chapters are particularly interesting. A quotation from one of them will give a fair sample of Lanier's lecture style. His independent and courageous preference for the Shakespearean or so-called illegitimate sonnet deserves especial notice:

My last lecture closed with some illustrations of the great variety of emotions with which the sonnet can deal successfully, that having been asserted one of the qualities by reason of which this form had been so universally adopted among modern English poets for the expression of their own individual feelings. A second circumstance which recommends the sonnet for these purposes is that its length and form are exactly what they should be in order to afford the most vivid expression to any lyric idea. In fact, I may here state a view of the sonnet which I think you will find one of the most convenient bases for founding a reasonable judgment of the strength and success of any work of this sort. Every sonnet should be a little drama. We are accustomed to think that scarcely any two forms of poetry could be farther apart than a sonnet and a play; but I believe you will not find it difficult to convince yourselves, upon a little reflection, that every sonnet approaches just so much nearer to perfection as it approaches nearer to the form of the drama. For, the type of a perfect lyrical poem always seems to me this: a flash of lightning in a dark night. The poet takes an idea susceptible of the lyric treatment, and flashes it in upon our minds by his art, so that, in however unpoetic and worldly mood our hearts may be, they retain some impression of the beautiful thought, just as even the unwilling eye at night, after beholding a bright stroke of lightning, still sees the forked lines of light after they have actually disappeared. The brilliancy prints itself by pure force of *intensity* on the nerve. Now it is this intensity which gauges the more or less successful treatment of an idea in a poem. What, then, is the best method of securing it? I answer, the dramatic method. . . .

Now this type of the drama is also the type of every strong sonnet. in the last two lines of the sonnet the crisis comes, where, with some the reason of its being, as Jealousy is of Shakespeare's "Othello," or Misanthropy is of "Timon of Athens," or Youthful Love is of "Romeo and Juliet." In the second place, this central idea should be gradually unfolded by means of subordinate ideas, which come on the stage like the characters in a play, the subordinate ideas acting and reacting upon each other so as to form a sort of plot, which thickens and thickens, until in the last two lines of the sonnet the crisis comes, where, with some epigrammatic fire of beauty, the whole *motive* of the sonnet is clearly and forcibly displayed in its relation to all the minor terms or characters that may have been employed. For this reason, in the third place, all these minor ideas which attend the main one should be of such a nature that they will not be inharmonious with the central informing idea, but will converge upon it, as I said, at the crisis, and will all add their weight and motive to it, so that the poem as a unity comes with the cumulative momentum of all its parts upon the reader. It was with a view to this flashing out of the crisis in the last two lines of the poem that I remarked in a previous lecture upon the superiority of the English sonnet in one particular to the Italian; this one particular being that the English sonnet always ends in a rhymed couplet, and this close antithesis of rhyme with rhyme affords an opportunity for a sharp and epigrammatic snapping off of the action, as it were, which is a great advantage in the hands of him who knows how to use it.

The last two chapters of Volume One are devoted to Shakespeare's pronunciation as based on the phonetic researches of A. J. Ellis in England and on the independent investigations of Noyes and Pierce in this country. Of course it is of interest to know how Shakespeare and his contemporaries actually talked; but such uncertain quantities as the shades of tone of vowels and consonants, which can hardly be determined and recorded in our own days even with the help of electrical appliances, become still more matters of speculation and conjecture when an attempt is made to reproduce the exact pronunciation of any past age. When Lanier enters this field of investigation he is not authoritative, and naturally it is here that he is least interesting and convincing. He doubtless made his lectures entertaining by vocal illustrations, and especially by reading a selection from the master poet in what was supposed to be the real tone and accent of the Elizabethan times.

In the opening chapters of the second volume, however, our author gets into a field in which he had made original

investigations and one in which he could speak with more authority. No one, perhaps, was better prepared to speak on the "Music of Shakespeare's Times" than the poet-musician. He had examined the music and the musical history of this period as carefully and as fully as it was possible for him to do, and the results of his investigations are worthy of respectful consideration and study. He shows how widely music was cultivated in all classes and how thoroughly it was studied and mastered by the Elizabethans. The different kinds of music, the motet, the fugue, the round, the extempore descant, the pricksong, the plain chant; the various forms of musical instruments, the lutes, the virginals, flutes, shawms, citterns, trumpets, the chest of viols, the psalteries, the organs; the popular dances, such as the pavan, the galliard, the allemande, the coranto, the paspy, the morris, etc.; the popular catches, madrigals, ballads, and ballad tunes of the times—in fact, the whole historical development of music, from the Gregorian chants to Queen Elizabeth's Virginal Book—are presented in the most delightful manner.

Four chapters are devoted to the domestic life of Shakespeare's time, and one to the doctors. The author had in mind still other lectures on the stage, the preachers, the lawyers, the artists, the scientists, so that the historical setting would doubtless have been very much extended had he lived. Still we have quite a satisfactory if not an adequate presentation in these volumes. Finally two chapters on the metrical tests, including the rhyme test, the weak-ending test, the double-ending test, and the rhythmic accent test, and three chapters on man's relation to the supernatural, to nature, and to man, close the series. It would be interesting to review these chapters in detail, but lack of space forbids.

Considerable space is devoted to a chronological arrangement of Shakespeare's plays. The whole purpose of the lecturer in this effort to make an accurate chronology of the plays was to show the inner development of the character and life of the poet through three stages or periods. The first of these was the Bright Period, or Carelessness, 1590-1601, representing "the vivacious imagination of the youth—

who has but lately flown out of the quiet Warwickshire fields up into the gay life of London—rioting about the contemporary world and down through the ages like a young swallow in the early morning, now flitting his wing in the water,—and like as not muddy water,—now sailing over the meadow-grass, now sweeping through the upper heights of heaven.”

After showing that all the comedies belong to this first period, and that there is but one strict tragedy, and this (“Romeo and Juliet”) “is simply a bridegroom’s passionate song, set off with a funeral hymn for a foil,” and that the chronicle plays are distinctly lighter and less personal than the later plays of this type, being more or less an answer to the popular and patriotic demand for this kind of play, the poet enters the second or Dark Period—Bitterness—1601-08, and in this almost all of the great tragedies are written. The questioning spirit of a time “out of joint,” the dark sorrow of neglected friendship, the death of his son Hamnet, the financial troubles of his father back at Stratford—all this weighs down on his spirit, and he is unconsciously expressing in the great single-passion tragedies and in the gloomy sonnets of this period the great conflict going on in his own soul.

Finally he emerges from this dark period and enters into the Heavenly Period—Forgiveness—1608-13. The author’s own words here are sufficiently condensed for quotation:

But, as suddenly as he entered it, our strong man emerges from this Dark Period into one which, without wishing to be fanciful, I have found no other name for than the Heavenly Period. He is, as his sonnet says, renewed. Instead of the bleak storms of the “Hamlet” and “Macbeth” time, now we have the great and beautiful calm of a spirit which, after having seen and shared in all the crime and all the grief of the world, has at length attained God out of knowledge and good out of infinite pain. If you contemplate this group of plays which I have here placed in the last period, you find them all hinging upon the sweet that follows the bitter: “Pericles,” “Cymbeline,” “Tempest,” “Winter’s Tale,” “Henry VIII.,” all these, in great and noble music, breathe of new love after estrangement, of the recovery of long-lost children, of the kissing of wives thought dead, of reconciliation, of new births of old happiness—most of all, of sweeping magnanimity, of heavenly forgiveness. If we listen to that epilogue of “The Tempest,” we cannot help believing that it is the

old poet Shakespeare himself who is writing his last play, or believes he is, and who, in the guise of Prospero, is laying down the mantle of his magic and preparing to depart from the lonesome island of this world into the Strange Country. "Now," he says in this epilogue which is spoken by Prospero. "Now my charms are all o'erthrown, And what strength I have's mine own, Which is most faint;" and you cannot forget the beautiful and passionate fervour of his closing appeal:

As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

There is not a dull page in the book. Every lover of literature, every serious-minded student who sees it, will not be satisfied, I take it, until he has read every word of the six hundred and fifty pages. There is just enough humor scattered here and there throughout the talks to lighten the more serious portions. For instance, at the opening of the course he says: "If you should infer from the lofty ideal of literature which my present purpose requires me to lay before you that I am disposed to magnify the literary function unduly, perhaps I can bribe you off from thinking so by making a bargain with you. If you will agree not to accuse your present lecturer of a tendency to believe that the very Fall of Man may clearly be attributed to the fact that Adam and Eve were not well grounded in English Literature, I will agree not to urge the consideration that if our first parents could have had the privilege of reading Milton's 'Paradise Lost' or Cædmon's account, and could so have seen their conduct in its true light, they would certainly have acted in a way that would have brought less disastrous consequences to their posterity."

Like Lowell, and with a skill almost if not quite equal to that of this eminent epigrammatic critic, Lanier had the faculty of coining a happy phrase to crystallize the sum and substance of an author and his work. For example, he said: "The trouble with Poe is that he doesn't know enough." While admitting that there was something about Whitman which "refreshed him like harsh salt spray," he condemned his lawlessness in art, saying: "Whitman is poetry's butcher. Huge raw collops slashed from the rump of poetry—and never mind gristle—is what Whitman feeds our souls with." Of

Swinburne he says: "He invited me to eat; the service was silver and gold, but no food therein save pepper and salt." Of William Morris: "He caught a crystal cupful of the yellow light of sunset, and, persuading himself to dream it wine, he drank it down with a sort of smile." In "The Crystal" there are a number of these terse, epigrammatic sentences. Of some of the more modern writers he says:

Emerson,
Most wise, that yet, in finding wisdom, lost
Thyself sometimes; tense Keats, with angels' nerves
Where men's were better; Tennyson, largest voice
Since Milton, but some register of wit
Wanting—all, all, I pardon ere 'tis asked,
Your more or less, your little mole that marks
You brother and your kinship seals with man.

In the present volumes there are numbers of these bright flashes. Mr. Henry Wysham Lanier mentions a few in his preface that were left on scraps of paper and backs of envelopes and not included in the lectures. Such as: "Shakespeare's vocabulary is wonderfully large. It does not seem to have occurred to those who have thought him an unlearned man that whatever words he uses he must have read; for words, which are wholly artificial products, cannot come by intuition, no matter how divine may be one's genius." Again: "It would have been as absurd for Shakespeare, in anticipation of more delicate-mouthed times, to mince his words as to parade the streets of London in long pantaloons and a stovepipe hat instead of hose and a plumed slouch."

It is needless to say that the gleam of the poet's imagination is often seen in a flash of brilliancy through the rich foliage of the lecturer's prose. The translations of the excerpts of Old English poetry are some of them particularly noteworthy, and the style throughout is lighted up by the ground-glass glow of poetic thought and ornament. The first lecture opens with a metaphor, and the last closes with a long and intricate comparison worked out with all the poet's care and precision. One might give dozens of instances of these poetic illustrations, but two or three must suffice.

In delineating the style of Shakespeare's sonnets he says: "Note particularly how the thought skips daintily from one idea to another, just touching each with a sort of salutation. You will see that ever and anon, by using a term in a double sense, he causes two significations to meet in the same word, like two lips at the same point, and there to kiss out a new hint of meaning." He calls this the dragon-fly-sipping-water style. To illustrate the mechanical regularity of the end-stopped lines as compared with the freedom and variety of the run-on lines, he reads some of Pope's couplets and characterizes the selection thus: "The lines move two and two, by inexorable couples, like charity children in procession, each pair holding hands, and the exactness becomes presently intolerable to the modern ear."

It goes without saying that if these lectures had been published during the poet's lifetime they would not have had the handsome setting in which they now have appeared. Of course, if the author had edited the work, some crudities of style due to rapid composition would have been eliminated, some parts which made good lecture material but which become sheer padding in a book would have been lopped off, some of the personal equation would have been removed, and we might have had a more perfectly unified series, a compacter treatment, and on the whole a more artistic presentation of the ideal of the master poet which the author had so nobly conceived. But we should have lost something of the personality of the lecturer, something of the man, and we much prefer to have the lectures just as the poet left them rather than lose anything of his charming personality. We might wish that the poet could have reaped some of the financial harvest which is now coming in, but it may be well that the lectures have lain thus long from the eyes of the public. The audience which the book will reach is now perhaps much larger than that which it would have commanded during the author's lifetime, and the mechanical perfection of the books, with their one hundred valuable illustrations, would have been impossible if the work had appeared earlier. In judging the content of the work one

should remember that the material was prepared almost twenty-five years ago, and in criticising the form one should bear in mind the purpose for which the lectures were intended and the absence of the author's pruning hand in the editing. Even in the face of the great strides made in critical methods during the last quarter of a century, it is my opinion that students and lecturers on English literature of the period of which the book treats will get much suggestion and information, as well as pleasure and inspiration, from these volumes.

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